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Segmented assimilation and cross-national comparative research on the integration of immigrants and their children

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Segmented assimilation and cross-national comparative research on the integration of immigrants and their children

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Summary

In the study of immigrant integration -- understood as the integration of immigrants and their offspring -- segmented assimilation theory stands out as the most comprehensive, coherent and systematic approach in its field. It is much discussed, but also much contested. This article attempts a critical evaluation of the theory. It looks also at the question if the theory applies to Europe and if it can thus be used in cross-national research.

Keywords: integration, segmented assimilation, downward assimilation, second generation, Europe, United States

Though most American researchers prefer the notion of assimilation while most Europeans speak about integration -- a minor difference nowadays --, researchers on both sides of the Atlantic seem to agree on some basic issues. So most agree that integration or assimilation¹ is often a long-term process taking three to four generations. Generally accepted is also the view that assimilation is not anymore - or never was - a simple straight-line process and that there are many ways immigrant groups get integrated or assimilated.

During the last decade and a half segmented assimilation (SA) theory has moved front-stage. The main reason is perhaps that it presents the reader with an impressive set of interrelated theoretical propositions that address many important issues in the study of immigrant integration. Since it was developed in the United States the question has arisen: is it relevant for the European situation and is it suitable for cross-national research? To answer these questions it is necessary first to look at the United States and to critically assess the theoretical debate there.

Segmented assimilation: the three variants

SA theorists have repeatedly argued that the old idea of adopting majority culture as a precondition for upward social mobility has lost its validity. They advance two reasons for this. In the first place, 'there are circumstances at present in which assimilation does not lead to economic progress and social acceptance, but to precisely the opposite results' (Portes 1995, p. 249). Portes refers here to immigrants with little human capital -- i.e. education and work experience -- who settle in inner city areas, where they come into contact with the indigenous, predominantly black population of the ghettos. If these immigrants take on the *adversarial* or *oppositional culture* of the latter, thereby generating what is called *reactive ethnicity*, this will result in downward assimilation or assimilation into the underclass, a situation of 'permanent poverty' (Portes & Zhou 1993, p. 82). This pattern of downward mobility is judged to be characteristic for groups such as Mexicans and Haitians.

The second argument is that upward mobility, or economic integration into the middle class, can go together with a deliberate retention of one's own culture and group: 'Immigrant youth who remain firmly ensconced in their respective ethnic communities may, by virtue of this fact, have a greater chance of educational and economic mobility through access to the resources that their community makes available' (Portes 1995, p. 251; see e.g. also Zhou 1997). This variant is characterised by a high degree of *linear ethnicity*, which Portes (1995, p. 256) describes as 'a continuation of cultural practices learned in the homeland.' Preservation of one's own group and culture serves primarily as a buffer against downward assimilation. This pattern is said to manifest itself in groups such as Cubans, Punjabi Sikhs and Vietnamese. I will refer to this variant as the pluralistic integration mode, borrowing from Dietrich Thränhardt (see below).

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In addition to these two mobility patterns, the old, traditional pattern of individual assimilation into the majority middle class still exists. This ‘classical pattern of assimilation’ is said nowadays to be only open for those immigrants who arrive with more than average human capital and who are, partly as a result of that, positively received by the government and the general population. Their children tend to be successful and easily move into the middle class.

The three variants of assimilation are fostered by three corresponding forms of acculturation: dissonant, selective and consonant (e.g. Portes & Rumbaut 2001a, p. 54). In the case of downward assimilation we see that parents cannot keep up with the acculturation of their children. They tend to lose control over them (dissonant acculturation). In pluralistic integration parents remain in control. There is less parent-child conflict, the process of acculturation is retarded and parts of the parental culture and language are maintained while the new culture is learned (selective acculturation). In the case of ‘classical assimilation’ parents can support their children in the process of acculturation since they more or less go through it together (consonant acculturation).

From the standpoint of the individual immigrant, the three patterns of social mobility imply assimilation into one of three segments of American society – the middle class, the underclass or an ethnic community – which is why they are designated as three forms of *segmented assimilation*.

Downward assimilation: the United States

Though segmented assimilation theory was developed on the basis of American data it is still highly debated there and some believe that the theory is hardly relevant for understanding immigrant integration in the United States or at least in some of its cities.

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3 In their book on the second generation in New York Kasnitz, Mollenkopf and Waters
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5 (2004, p. 397) conclude for example that '(...) these chapters give the striking
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7 impression that their subjects rarely fit in the three boxes posited by segmented
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9 assimilation theory (...).' There is no doubt, however, that the theory has stimulated
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11 debate on the integration of the second generation and has been productive of research.
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13 Debate focuses especially on the downward assimilation variant.²
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17 According to the segmented assimilation school in the era of the old immigration
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19 immigrant groups followed the path of classical, straight-line assimilation into a society
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21 with a more or less monolithic culture. Nowadays immigrants are confronted by a
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23 society with a variety of racial and ethnic subcultures (e.g. Portes and Rumbaut 1996, p.
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25 247). The children of immigrants with little human capital now run the risk of
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27 downward assimilation into the native black underclass. Following Wilson (e.g. 1987)
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29 Portes describes the culture of this underclass as follows:
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36 'Each instance of downward levelling norms has been preceded by extensive
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38 periods, often several generations, in which the upward mobility of a
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40 minority has been blocked. This has been followed by the emergence of
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42 collective solidarity based on opposition to those conditions and an
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44 accompanying explanation of the group's economic and social inferiority as
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46 caused by outside oppression. Although accurate from a historical
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48 standpoint, the emergence of such norms further reduces chances for
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50 individual advancement to the extent that youth are socialized into the
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52 futility of "making it" on the basis of one's own merit' (Portes 1995, p. 253).
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Assimilation into the underclass thus means the adoption of a culture and life-style that further reduces the chances for advancement. So, in order to assess if we can speak of downward assimilation we must know if an underclass subculture exists. In Wilson's view (1997, p. 72) this requires a subtle cultural analysis such as given in some ethnographies. Most research on the SA theory is quantitative and is obviously not suited for such a subtle cultural analysis. Quantitative researchers have to resort to a variable number of indicators, such as unemployment, weak attachment to the labour force, dropping out of school, premature childbearing and being arrested or incarcerated for a crime (e.g. Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005). One could argue that as a result in practice often a weak version of the concept of underclass is used.

Downward assimilation is often described as leading to a state of *permanent* poverty and underclass position. There is little information of what is meant by 'permanent', but it suggests that even third and later generations will not be able to escape their predicament and move up on the social ladder. Only in one place I found some confirmation of this:

There is no empirical evidence at present that groups confined to the working class or that have moved downward into the native underclass would miraculously rise during the third generation to alter their collective status (Portes and Rumbaut 2001a, p. 283).

This statement seems to conflict with the previous quote that suggests that it takes several generations for an underclass culture to emerge.

The Mexicans are the crucial test-case for the downward assimilation hypothesis. The Mexicans are the largest immigrant group in the United States and are

often mentioned as a case of downward assimilation or at least as at risk of following that road (e.g. López and Stanton-Salazar 2001). So let us have a brief look at a study by Joel Perlmann (2005) who compares the Mexicans today with the SCEN (Southern, Central and Eastern European immigrants, non-Jews) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Perlmann includes native blacks in his comparison since they play an important role in segmented assimilation theory. Perlmann's detailed and complex analysis focuses on education and the labour market. Like the SCEN the Mexican second generation is making progress, but it progresses more slowly than the SCEN did. So it may perhaps take four to five generations rather than three to four to reach parity with the native-white mainstream. The Mexican second generation fares better than the native blacks, particularly because they show much less socially dysfunctional behaviours, such as young unwed childbearing for women and low labour force attachment, high incarceration rates and high rates of disappearance for men (p.123). In other words they do not show (yet) 'typical' underclass attitudes and behaviours.

Though Perlmann believes a 'downward slide' to be possible, he thinks it is not very likely to occur. In his judgment his analysis partly confirms segmented assimilation theory: in the United States today upward mobility is more difficult for immigrant groups with a low level of education than in the past.³ This is in Perlmann's view a consequence of the increasing wage differential that affects most American workers, not only immigrants. He believes that if this trend could be reversed, 'it would transform the dynamics we have reviewed and much else in American social life' (p.124). Mexicans may not qualify for the label 'downward assimilation', but (part of) the second generation is at risk. Waldinger and Feliciano (2004) come to similar conclusions, though they seem to see virtually no risk of downward assimilation.

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There is clearly no consensus on the phenomenon of downward assimilation. But what is actually being asserted by the proponents of the downward assimilation thesis? As I argued in actual research practice a weak version of the concept of underclass is being used. And often no clear distinction is made between being at risk of following the downward assimilation path or having reached already a point of no return. In the same text both formulations may occur. The disagreement seems not to be so much on the data, but on their interpretation and the predictions based on it. This explains probably why Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller (2005, p. 1003; see also Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008, p. 16) are so surprised that their opponents such as Perlmann can deny the existence of downward assimilation while their data in their eyes so clearly prove its existence.

Downward assimilation: Europe

According to some people downward assimilation in Europe cannot possibly exist since there is no native black underclass in European inner cities and the presence of such an underclass is basic to the process of downward assimilation of the ‘new’ immigrants in the United States.

Certainly the process in Europe is not taking place in exactly the same way, but the issue is not *how* an ethnic group or large part of it becomes part of the underclass, but *if* that happens. Contact with a native black underclass is not a necessary condition for that to occur. A pre-existing underclass may have other colours; to some degree the underclass may be ‘imported’ and underclass formation is also a product of structural factors such as the hourglass economy and processes of exclusion.

During the eighties and first half of the nineties the 'underclass' concept was a key concept in the debate on poverty, ethnicity and inequality in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere in Europe.⁴ I will restrict myself here mainly to the Dutch case. During the first part of the nineties Dutch society was almost yearly warned that a substantial number of the Surinamese, Antilleans, Moroccans and Turks could end up in the underclass (see e.g. Vermeulen & Penninx 2000, pp. 224-226). Most debate on ethnic underclass formation focused on the two largest groups of immigrants, the Moroccans and the Turks. On the basis of Dutch research Margaret Gibson (1997, p. 438) argued that Turks and Moroccans represented cases of downward assimilation. Dutch researchers have usually been more cautious arguing that it was still too early to arrive at such a conclusion since the notion of underclass formation requires the reproduction of a low social position over generations and the emergence of an underclass culture and presupposes at least the existence of a second generation that has been on the labour market for quite some time (e.g. Roelandt 1994, p. 219; see also Roelandt and Veenman 1993; Vermeulen 1998, p. 104-107). The first results of the TIES-project⁵ for the Netherlands point to what the authors call a strong polarization within both groups (Crul and Heering 2008). While about a quarter of second-generation Turks and Moroccans is doing very well, especially if we take into account that the first generation has an extremely low level of education or no education at all, a roughly equal part is staying far behind and may perhaps risk stagnation or joining the underclass. It confirms the importance of diversification and polarization in the second generation noted also by others and makes characterization of ethnic groups as a whole in terms of one of the categories of segmented assimilation dangerous. Roughly a quarter, however, is clearly 'at risk'.

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Children of Moroccan immigrants have always have been more involved in street-crime and street violence than Turkish youth in the Netherlands and they are considered to be more at risk of ‘marginalization’⁶ or joining the underclass. According to some researchers processes of marginalization among Moroccan youth had already started before migration as a result of a long period of absence of the father and related late family reunion resulting in weak parental control (see Van Niekerk 1993, p. 66; cf. Waldinger and Perlmann 1998, p.10). The risk of downward assimilation of lower-class Antilleans is more clearly a continuation of pre-migration developments. Up to the early eighties the small Antillean community in the Netherlands served as *the* example of successful integration. Many Antillean immigrants had arrived as students and were doing well. When in the 1980s ‘Other Antilleans’⁷, from the lower class or *volksklasse*, started to migrate the picture changed dramatically. These new Antilleans came mainly from neighborhoods of Curaçao with a high percentage of unemployment, one-parent families, criminality and violence.⁸

Roxane Silberman, Richard Alba and Irène Fournier (2007) pose the question if downward assimilation exists in France in the case of the Maghrebins. They conclude that it does. The Maghrebins are more often unemployed than the French (18.7 vs. 7.2 per cent) or other immigrant groups. The differences cannot be explained only by differences in the level of education between them and the French. They also perceive more discrimination against them on the labour market than other groups. The only exception is the sub-Saharan Africans. They score almost the same as the Maghrebians on both unemployment and perceived discrimination. In the conclusion the authors briefly mention that North African families are concentrated in the poorest neighbourhoods and that ‘youthful members of the second generation are relatively likely to be engaged in petty crime and gang violence’ (2007, p. 23). On this basis the

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3 authors conclude that the 'segmented-assimilation phenomenon' exists, though it must
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5 be added that at one point they speak of the North Africans as a group *at risk of*
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7 downward assimilation, a description that seems to me more appropriate. The data the
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9 authors provide are rather limited. The authors speak about the North African group as a
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11 whole, but one wonders to what percentage of the population the risk of downward
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13 assimilation applies.
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17 Silberman, Alba and Fournier also point to a difference between the American
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19 and European situation. In segmented assimilation theory racism is thought to have a
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21 central role in the creation of downward assimilation. In the case of France, however,
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23 skin-colour based racism does not have the same power as in the United States.
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25 Religious difference is more often the basis of discrimination and exclusion. The
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27 mechanisms producing downward assimilation are thus not the same in Europe and the
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29 United States. In my view the authors are right to argue that SA theory should be
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31 reformulated in such a way that it can be applied to a broader range of settings.
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35 It is a pretty well established fact that not only in France but also in other
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37 Western-European countries with black populations skin-colour based racism, as
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39 understood here, is weaker than in the very race conscious USA (Marable 1995, p. 185;
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41 see also Vermeulen 1999). As has been noted also by others, in Europe it is less the
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43 blacks who are at the bottom of the 'ethno-racial' hierarchy and who are most often the
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45 object of prejudice and discrimination, but the Muslims (e.g. Modood 1991; Lucassen
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47 2005). Silberman, Alba and Fournier even conclude that religion-based discrimination
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49 is the mechanism that produces downward assimilation in France. It is however striking
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51 that only about 5 per cent of their respondents mention 'religion' when asked about why
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53 they are discriminated. 'Name' and 'skin colour' come first.⁹ These data can be
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55 explained in several ways. It can, for example, be that the North Africans are
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discriminated because of their low socio-economic status or for being Maghrebin. Name, skin colour, religion (e.g. the scarf) and place of residence may all be just markers for this.

Pluralistic integration: the United States and Europe

Pluralistic integration is less often a topic of debate than downward assimilation. Like downward assimilation pluralistic integration is not considered to be a pre-1965 phenomenon. The segmented assimilationists tell their readers more than once that classical assimilation was characteristic for the past, while now there is not one, but there are three variants of assimilation.

I will try to show the relevance of the pluralistic variant for the study of past and present, in the United States and Europe. I will present the reader here very briefly with two cases and make some, partly critical remarks on this mode of integration or assimilation as presented by the segmented assimilationists. My cases are Greeks in the United States in the early twentieth century and in post-1960 Germany (Vermeulen and Venema 2000; Vermeulen 2008).

Case 1: The Greeks in the United States

In the period from 1880 to 1930, some 28 million people migrated to the United States. Among them Greeks who arrived mainly between 1900 and 1920. In total about 10 per cent of the Greek population left for America, a similar percentage as in the case of Italy. Initially Greek communities were composed largely of men and return migration was very high. Most of the Greeks came from the Peloponnesus. Emigration was not

new to this region. Many villagers had left earlier to start a new life in the Greek trading diaspora in Romania, Southern Russia, Asia Minor, Egypt or elsewhere. Education was important in the diaspora communities and more than a few children of migrants became doctors and lawyers.

The villagers in the Peloponnesus were simple and poor peasant smallholders, but they were well integrated in the market. Moreover, many had some schooling. The region had a dense network of primary schools and even a number of secondary schools. These schools were largely financed by the trading diaspora, either directly or via the state. The Peloponnesus had, moreover, a strong relation with the state bureaucracy in Athens. The Greek government offices, from janitor to minister, were largely staffed by people from the Peloponnesus. Peasants thus valued education and saw it as a means of upward social mobility, either in the state bureaucracy or the diaspora.

In Kostas Tsoukalas' (1977) phrasing the migrants who left for the United States were 'over-educated' poor peasants with a petit-bourgeois mentality.¹⁰ There were few skilled workers among them when compared to the Italians. After their arrival in the US the Greeks found work as unskilled labourers, initially in the mines and in the construction of railways. They settled predominantly in the larger cities, such as New York and Chicago. Soon the Greeks began to improve their socio-economic situation through both entrepreneurship and education. Relatively large numbers of Greek immigrants were quick to succeed in business, especially in the restaurant business. Some, coming from the Greek diaspora, were already experienced entrepreneurs.¹¹ Greeks were also quick to organize themselves. Their organizations were not only inward-looking. Many had a utilitarian character and kept in frequent contact with the outside world.

The Greeks stood out in their educational achievements. For many the ideal was ‘first generation in business, second generation into the professions’. In the US censuses of 1960 and 1970 the second-generation Greeks could boast the highest educational levels of all ethnic groups and were surpassed only by the Jews in average income (Moskos 1980, p. 111).

Case 2: Greeks in Germany

Greek mass migration to ‘Europe’ -- as the Greeks tend to say -- started a decade after the civil war (1946-9) ended. The large majority of migrants went to Germany. The migrants came overwhelmingly from a rural background -- mainly from Northern Greece -- and had little or no education, partly as a result of the World War II and the civil war.¹² There were few skilled workers among the Greeks in comparison to other Mediterranean groups, including the Turks. Both men and women came to work in industry, but many lost their jobs with the restructuring of the economy after 1973. Since the economic prospects in Greece had improved many Greeks returned, especially after the dictatorship ended in 1974.

Since the mid-1970s the proportion of self-employed -- mainly in the restaurant, catering and hotel sector -- rose very strongly: according to the micro-census of 2004 15.5 per cent of persons with the Greek nationality are entrepreneurs,¹³ while other immigrant groups show lower levels of entrepreneurial activity. Both Spanish and Greek immigrants attach much significance to the education of their children and put a lot of energy in it, but while the Spanish put their energy in integration in the German school system,¹⁴ the Greeks were and are very active in developing and maintaining a network of ‘national’, i.e. Greek schools at both primary and secondary level. The precise way in which these Greek national schools function differs between the German

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3 federal states (*Länder*). Greek schools may be attended instead of or in addition to the
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5 German schools. They are financed partly by the Greek state. One reason why many
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7 Greek parents attach much significance to *Greek* education is that they want their
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9 children to have the possibility to study in Greece. Relations with the country of origin
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11 remain strong, movements between Greece and Germany are frequent and return
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13 migration remains relatively high. Greek children perform well in education, including
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15 higher education; a bit less than Spanish children, but much better than Italians and
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20 Turks.

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22 The high degree of ethnic cohesion is also evident in other domains. The
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24 children of Greek immigrants do not marry often with native Germans, they have many
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26 co-ethnic friends, keep their mother tongue alive and are not very eager to obtain
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28 German citizenship. In his research among young Greeks Schultze (1992: 264) found
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30 that just over half of these mostly second-generation Greeks rejected the idea of
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32 acquiring German citizenship, even if that would not mean losing Greek citizenship.
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Greeks are well organized and have a large number of voluntary associations. These
associations are often directed at issues of (Greek) education and Greek culture and
many have strong relations with the country and regions of origin. Thränhardt and
Hunger characterize the Greek pattern as pluralistic integration, while they consider the
Spanish to be assimilationist (e.g. Thränhardt 2000, pp. 33-6; Hunger 2004, p. 24). To
characterize the Greek case, they also use the term 'immigrant colony'
(*Einwandererkolonie*; e.g. Thränhardt 2000, p. 36).

Though I have not used the vocabulary of segmented assimilation in describing the
cases of the Greeks in the United States and Germany, the analogy with the descriptions
given for the third mode of integration is striking. It is, among others, evident in the

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entrepreneurship, the social cohesion and the success in education. When comparing Greeks and Italians in the United States (Vermeulen and Venema 2000) there are a number of striking differences which cannot easily be explained by conditions in the United States: the two groups have in many respects a similar cultural background, started out in the same occupations, settled at roughly the same time in the same places and were subject to similar forms of racism.

Why is it that some immigrant communities with little human and financial capital follow the road of downward assimilation while others follow the pluralistic integration path? The SA authors often stress that among immigrants of limited means the role of social capital is vital (e.g. Zhou and Bankston 1996; Portes, Fernández-Kelly and Haller 2005, p.1013). Strong families and strong ethnic communities thus seem at first sight to make the difference. At the same time, however, when discussing downward assimilation Portes rejects the idea that it is characterized by anomie or low social capital. Quite the contrary, the downward levelling norms can be sustained by the very virtue of the existing social networks and community structures. Portes (1995, p.254) argues that it is better to see this as an example of the potentially negative effects of social capital. The question remains: what explains the difference?¹⁵ How come some groups can dispose over more social capital than others or -- if we assume all groups enter with the same amount of social capital as SA theorists seem to suggest -- why does it have these different effects?

In my opinion at least part of the answer can be found in the pre-migration history and the socio-cultural legacy immigrants brought with them. Perhaps the most important difference between Italians and Greeks in the US is that the Italian community was internally divided in several ways. The sharpest divide was between Northern and Southern Italians. The Northern Italians deeply disdained the Southerners

and even went so far to persuade the American authorities to register the Southerners separately. There was no such divide between diaspora Greeks and Greeks from the mainland. The second could profit from the first, who acted as role models and sources of knowledge and experience. The Greeks entered the United States with a different background and world view than Southern Italians, coming from a region often described as an internal colony.

SA theory -- and it is not alone in this respect -- tends to see immigrants at the moment of immigration as 'people without history' (Wolf 1982).¹⁶ Only in very few places SA theorists touch on the issue: Portes and MacLeod (1999), for example, argue that the importance of social capital has perhaps been overestimated in recent research. It is rather *the entire weight of experience* of an immigrant group that has to be taken into account for understanding their children's educational careers. I suppose this includes pre-migration experiences. And more recently Portes and Fernández-Kelly (2008, p.18) drew attention to the importance of differences in 'family patterns', brought from the countries of origin.

The SA theory presents pluralistic integration as the ideal mode of integration or at least as the one to be preferred over the other two. A main reason for this is that it reduces parent-child conflict and promotes self-esteem and psychological well-being (e.g. Portes and Rumbaut 2001b, p. 274). There are indications that this holds true also for the Greeks in Germany. But this mode may also have some disadvantages. Ethnic cohesion and hierarchical family relations may have negative consequences for the position of women (Crul and Vermeulen 2003, p. 974). And under certain circumstances this mode of integration may promote ethnocentrism and narrow-minded nationalism. In her book on 'Greek emigration ideology', Helene Manos (2001) criticizes the 'ethnocentric character' of Greek life in Germany and the role of the Greek

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state in promoting this. She points out that this does not tally with the needs of countries like Germany that have become more culturally diverse as a result of immigration. And -- one might add -- it does also not tally with the needs of Greece, a country that in the last two decades has become more and more culturally diverse as a result of immigration.

Conclusion

Segmented assimilation theory has greatly contributed to our understanding that cultural assimilation is not a guarantee for upward mobility and that, on the other hand, a selective keeping to the old ways may promote such mobility. It makes also a good case for the existence of the three variants of assimilation. Nevertheless, it has in my view a number of weak points.

The ‘straight-line assimilation’ variant gets very little attention in the literature, presumably because it seems least problematic and most similar to ‘classical assimilation’ in the past. But is it really so similar? If the classical variant is nowadays only open to people with more than average human capital -- presumably including a reasonable knowledge of the English language and of American culture --who move almost straight into the American middle class, the assimilation process is clearly ‘straight-line’, but it seems quite different from the often-cited ‘classical’ pattern which was perhaps not that straight-line after all (as my case study above has shown). It looks more like a new variant, which is at least partially a product of globalization.

A second point of critique concerns the concept of downward assimilation. I argued that in order to make a strong case for downward assimilation one would have to show the existence of ‘downward levelling norms’ (Portes, see above) and of an oppositional underclass subculture. Partly because much of the research is quantitative

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3 this is often not convincingly done. In many cases research convinces this reader of a
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5 *risk* of downward assimilation, but not of downward assimilation itself. This is not a
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7 minor difference.
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10 A third point raising questions is the usual suggestion that downward
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12 assimilation and pluralistic integration are end-stages, resulting in respectively
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14 'permanent poverty' or upward assimilation combined with permanent biculturalism.
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16 There is little or no discussion about the possibility of change here. This is actually
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18 remarkable because the phenomena which are used as indicators of downward
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20 assimilation -- such as unemployment, school dropout, and criminality -- may clearly be
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22 temporary. This was, for example, the case for the black Surinamese in the Netherlands.
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24 The same holds true for reactive ethnicity. If downward assimilation is a process taking
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26 several generations it is in many cases too early to come to final conclusions. Pluralistic
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28 integration is also better not conceived as an end-state. It functions often as a spring-
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30 board, a 'reculer pour mieux sauter' as the French expression goes.¹⁷ When second-
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32 generation children succeed well in education this often results in joining the
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34 mainstream. This does not necessarily mean the dissolution of the ethnic community.
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36 Even though entering the mainstream the second and third generation may maintain
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38 relations with the ethnic community and not all of them leave the ethnic community.
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40 Moreover, those who do may be replaced by newcomers. Ethnic entrepreneurs often
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42 prefer newcomers over the 'spoiled' second generation and may actively recruit people
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44 from their home area.¹⁸
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53 Then there is the question of the 'old' versus 'new' migration. SA theorists (and
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55 many others) believe that the old migration was characterized by 'straight-line'
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57 assimilation. My case of the Greeks in the USA suggests that pluralistic integration
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59 existed also in the old migration. And some groups, such as the Italians, could also be
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considered as examples for (non-permanent) downward assimilation or at least of having been at risk of downward assimilation and showing periods of ‘stagnation’. Their integration process shows at least some resemblance to that of the Mexicans (e.g. Perlmann 2005).

The previous point relates perhaps to the fact that there is hardly any discussion among the SA theorists on the origins of their own theory. The downward assimilation variant builds on or relates to theories of the underclass or the ghetto poor and to the culture-of-poverty theory (Lewis 1968),¹⁹ and the pluralistic variant has parallels with theories of trading or middlemen minorities (e.g. Vermeulen 1991; Zenner 1991). This makes it quite questionable that these variants would be new phenomena of the new migration. It is no coincidence, for example, that the old trading minorities (e.g. Chinese, Jews and Greeks) are well represented in the pluralistic integration variant, then and now.

My case studies are intended to convey the message that ‘the entire weight of the experience of a group’ is relevant for understanding their integration process, including the pre-migration experience. Giving attention to the pre-migration experience may help us understanding why two groups with low human capital and perhaps many other similarities nevertheless may follow a different integration track.

Though in my opinion SA theory is as applicable to the USA as to Europe, it is not that clear how much of the cross-national differences in the ways immigrants and their children integrate can be explained by it. For cross-national research it is indispensable to include an institutional approach,²⁰ which focuses on nation-state differences, either as a supplement to or as a replacement of the SA approach -- depending on the ‘intellectual problems’ to be solved.

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¹ In this article I use 'integration' and 'assimilation' as synonymous.

² It should be emphasized that the concept segmented assimilation refers to the three variants of assimilation (e.g. Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 44-46). It is often wrongly applied to only one of its variants: downward assimilation.

³ It is incorrect to state -- as Portes and Fernández-Kelly (2008, p. 15) are doing -- that Perlmann argues 'that there is really nothing new in today's process of second-generation assimilation'.

⁴ See e.g. Engbersen 1990, Faist 1993, Martiniello 1996, Mingione 1996, and Morris 1994.

⁵ See the article of Maurice Crul and Jens Schneider in this special issue for more details.

⁶ Marginalization refers here to alcohol and drug abuse, playing truant, hanging around on the street and small street crime (note the similarity with indicators for downward assimilation).

⁷ This was the title of the first study drawing attention to the changing picture of Antillean immigration (Amesz, Steijlen and Vermeulen 1989).

⁸ In the case of the lower-class Afro-Surinamese there is a similar pre-migration influence. The situation of the Afro-Surinamese has improved more than that of the working-class Antillean population. On the Surinamese see Van Niekerk 2002.

⁹ When asked why they are discriminated 26.5 percent of the men and 18.9 percent of the women mention 'name', 22.2 percent of the men and 8.8 percent of the women mention skin colour.

¹⁰ The Marxist sociologist Tsoukalas used the word 'overeducation' because the educational system had developed far beyond what one would expect given the stage of development of the productive sectors of the economy. This is not to say Greeks had -- what we now would consider -- a high level of education: 52 percent of the Greeks who settled in the United States had some schooling (against 25 percent of the Italians). Tsoukalas uses the term petit bourgeois mentality because many left with the idea of setting up one's own business, usually after working in the business of a relative or co-villager.

¹¹ About 20 percent of the immigrants came from the Greek diaspora.

¹² Even in the 1980s still 6 percent of the male and 21 percent of the female immigrant population in Germany was illiterate (Vermeulen 2008, p.19).

¹³ The percentage of the population of Greek descent dependent on the ethnic economy is much higher.

¹⁴ The Spanish abolished special Spanish classes, even against the will of German authorities.

¹⁵ Another possible explanation is to be found in differential racism, but if that occurs it needs an explanation too and one that goes further than just a reference to skin colour.

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¹⁶ This is partly the result of an unproductive culture versus structure debate (see Vermeulen 2001), resulting in the fear of ‘blaming the victim’.

¹⁷ ‘Reculer pour mieux sauter’ can be translated as ‘to step backwards to take a run-up for a better jump’.

¹⁸ See e.g. Vermeulen 1984: 91-112 on the Chinese in Surinam.

¹⁹ It seems that the lower class can be included in this short list: ‘(...) what we now call the underclass bears a striking resemblance to what sociologists used to call the lower class. Both are characterized by high levels of joblessness, illiteracy, illegitimacy, violence, and despair’ (Jencks 1991: 28).

²⁰ An institutional approach is understood here as an approach which looks at the effects the way institutions such as the labour market and education - i.e. the different ways they are organized from state to state – have on the process of integration of immigrant groups.